

Pink Floyd's Great 'Wall'

By JOHN ROCKWELL

It seems now as if Pink Floyd's "Wall" production is gone, after only 12 performances — although there is talk of a few European shows in the spring and summer. The most spectacular, lavish stage show in the history of rock was simply too expensive to tour in the conventional manner, so after seven performances in Los Angeles and five last week at the Nassau Coliseum, it's gone. But hardly forgotten.

What will stick in the memory are the special effects, created with a care and on a scale literally unprecedented in rock concert annals. Above all, there was the gigantic wall itself, constructed "brick" by "brick" during the first hour of the show and eventually extending across the entire stage end of the coliseum, some 40 feet high at the center and 130 feet long at the top. Christo, the Bulgarian conceptual artist who likes to build his own walls, would have been envious — or proud.

The wall was destroyed at the end, in a satisfying heap of falling bricks, dry ice and electronic rumbling. The collapse of the temple at the end of "Samson et Dalila" at the Metropolitan Opera should look this good. But before the wall collapsed, there was much else to wonder at: gigantic, balloon-like puppets that embodied the animations of Gerald Scarfe that could otherwise be seen in brilliant slides and animated films; little vignettes that took place in front of the wall or on top of it, or in one instance on a mini-stage that appeared when a panel opened up in the wall, and two wonderful effects from previous Pink Floyd tours — a large model airplane that traversed the full length of the auditorium (on a wire) before smashing into one end of the wall, and a huge pig (at least 30 feet long) that lumbered out over the crowd on a track, its eyes glowing evilly.

But now that the shows have gone,

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Bob Jenkins

Pink Floyd's "Wall" show—"Just the latest and most extreme extension of acid rock?"

one must try to gather oneself together and attempt to assess the meaning of it all, if any. Was this just the latest and most extreme extension of acid rock, that genre of mind-blowing music from which Pink Floyd emerged in Britain in 1966? The answer seems to be both yes and no. Clearly "The Wall" stage show in some sense was a sort of ultimate light show, designed to do little more than awe and impress. But it was also a serious attempt at a mass theatrical spectacle by Roger Waters, the member of Pink Floyd who composed nearly all this album's music, wrote most of its words and conceived the show.

Rock stage shows have often had their spectacular elements, but they have hardly ever heretofore lived up to the potential of a modern day mass spectacle. The reason, pure and simple, is greed (or, more charitably put, "economics"). As rock grew more popular in the 60's, the possibility of playing concerts in huge places became a reality. At the first such shows — e.g., the Beatles in their stadium concerts in the mid-60's, the spectacle it-

self was the thing, and the sheer thrill in being in the same general space as one's idols.

Soon, however, rock stars began to experiment with the possibilities for theatrically conceived spectacle: David Bowie, Alice Cooper and Kiss are some of the best known purveyors of such theater, quite apart from Pink Floyd's own past tours. In so doing they were merely the latest in a long line of democratically inspired and/or megamaniacal theater people who had similarly attempted to expand theatrical spectacle beyond the confines of an enclosed theater and out into a city's arenas and public spaces. The very ideal of the Greek tragedy, as a threatening image of a community for that community, lies at the root of this dream. Later, Roman spectacles in the Coliseum and Baroque operas attained degrees of lavishness still not matched.

Since then such diverse phenomena as performances of Handel's "Messiah" in Victorian England and America with up to 5,000 choristers, the expansion of the Barnum and Bailey Cir-

cus into what it is today, half-time football displays, sports demonstrations and flash-card events in Communist China and the theatrical visions of Max Reinhardt ("Everyman" at Salzburg) and Robert Wilson have carried on the tradition.

But until recently, they all lacked what the rock concert boasts to excess: the power of electronic amplification to fill large spaces with sound as well as sights. With rock amplification and a music that makes use of that potential — cause and effect become cloudy in situations like this — the creator of mass theatrical spectacles has at last the possibility of creating a truly multimedia event that can appeal to the thousands or even the hundreds of thousands.

The recent rush of enthusiasm for video is a small-scaled manifestation of this same impulse toward the dramatic visualization of rock. But video denies the communal and celebratory implications of the large-scale rock concert. Yet it remains tempting, since for all

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its costs, those costs are paltry next to what Pink Floyd must have spent on a show like "The Wall." Figures varied and seemed sometimes contradictory, but one source put the cost of the show at \$1.8 million, which included a full month spent at the Los Angeles Sports Arena before the Feb. 7 premiere set-

ting things up. Most bands' inclinations toward theater stop well short of that sort of self-sacrifice.

Quite apart from costs, there are other ways in which Pink Floyd needn't necessarily serve as a model for other rock bands. "The Wall" has its muddled moments, conceptually, it doesn't flow along all that coherently in more basic dramatic terms, and it suffers from an ending (after the wall's destruction) that seems all too pat: if one wants a rebirth of childlike innocence after the apocalypse, Robert Wilson and Philip Glass did it far, far better in "Einstein on the Beach."

The "Wall" show remains a milestone in rock history, though, and there's no point in denying it. Never again will one be able to accept the technical clumsiness, distorted sound and meagre visuals of most arena rock shows as inevitable. If Mr. Waters or the rest of the band feel like it, perhaps they can reach down within themselves and come up with something of an artistic merit to match their imagination and technical skills in the area of special effects. Until then, however, the "Wall" show will still be the touchstone against which all future rock spectacles must be measured. ■

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